

Show Some Love: Youth Responses to "Kiss Me Thru The Phone"

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Abstract: *Although hip hop's emphases on violence and sex have been the subject of numerous research studies, little is known about the connection between hip hop and love. This study begins to fill that lacuna by investigating how individuals exposed to hip hop culture perceive love. Seventy-one youth of color ages 14-25 viewed rapper Soulja Boy Tell 'Em's video "Kiss Me Thru The Phone" and completed open-ended survey questions about their relationship to hip hop, interpretations of the video, and lived experiences with love. The youth's responses reveal that they actively sought love's representations within hip hop culture.*

Many youth receive their gender, sex, and relationship scripts from hip hop (Bryant, 2008; Hutchinson, 1999; Muñoz-Laboy, Weinstein, & Parker, 2007; Stephens & Few, 2007; Stephens & Phillips, 2003; Ward, Hansbrough, & Walker, 2005). Unfortunately most of hip hop's mediated heterosexual gendered scripts are problematic because they primarily depict relationships of resentment and a love ethic of exchange. The seriousness of the resentment brewing between men and women within hip hop is obvious in the language used to describe the current state of affairs. Cole and Guy-Sheftall (2003) describe a "major war" while Kitwana (2002) describes a "gender crisis" in his *Hip Hop Generation* chapter on "the new war of the sexes" (p. 87).

A majority of hip hop's resentment flows from men to women. For example, many hip hop music lyrics and accompanying videos depict African American men who direct their frustration with social forms of oppression towards young African American female "bitches and hoers." Verbally assaulting and blaming women for social and personal challenges is a direct result of patriarchy. Patriarchy conditions men to believe in an innate male preeminence that encourages them "to treat women as fundamentally less valuable...and tries to control, label, and at times, exploit women's sexuality. It assumes that men should rightly be the primary leaders of their families and of society at large" (Rose, 2008, p. 118). Dyson (2001) describes patriarchy's effects as "femiphobia—the fear and disdain of the female, expressed in the verbal abuse and protracted resentment of women" (p. 181). He identifies femiphobia as endemic to hip hop discourse.

Femiphobia generally develops from women's supposed sexual power over men as well as their threat to men's (financial) status. Kimmel (1990) explains that men's resentment is premised on perceived powerlessness. He writes:

Most men feel powerless and are often angry at women, who they perceive as having sexual power over them: the power to arouse them and to give or withhold sex. This fuels both sexual fantasies and the desire for revenge. (p. 309)

The sexual exploitation rampant in hip hop reestablishes male power at the expense of healthy depictions of male and female relationships.

Many rappers retain an aggressive posture toward women whom they, incidentally but not coincidentally, consider a threat to their opportunities for success in life (Ralph, 2006). In Stephens and Phillips' (2003) discussion of African American women's sexual scripts within hip hop culture, the baby mama poses a direct threat to a man's income. They explain that the "Baby Mama script is based in the idea that the girl purposely got pregnant so that she could maintain a relationship, take the man's money, or keep part of him" (p. 34). A baby mama represents a persistent threat to a man's ability to keep his money. And because money is a primary signifier of status, some men perpetuate more virulent femiphobic sentiments when they feel financially threatened.

These resentment relationships often translate into a love ethic of exchange where both men and women appear to give up on loving one another and trade money and services/servicing to enhance their status. Gold diggers, neo-groupies, and freak sexual scripts are prime examples. According to Stephens & Phillips, "The Gold Digger will supposedly resort to any and all sexual means to gain whatever financial rewards she wants or needs, seeing men as stepping stones to provide for short-term needs" (p. 18). Men, in turn, "want women they can buy, presumably so they can control them" (p. 19). Each partner, however, is expendable. When the money runs out, the gold digger divests herself. When the man no longer desires the gold digger, he cuts off his financial support. Stephens and Phillips explain: "what is lost is never love, friendship, or a healthy relationship" (p. 19). In her exposé of hip hop neo-groupies, Good (2004) describes a nineties progression of the groupie where "fame [is no longer] the goal. It's about money" (p. 252). In relationships of exchange, gold diggers and neo-groupies can trade sex for money and, in the case of the freak, women trade sex for pleasure with no emotional attachments.

According to Stephens and Phillips, "Freaks use sex as a means of gaining sexual control over their partners while fulfilling their own insatiable physical needs" (p. 21). Men are comfortable beneficiaries of sexual pleasure "but have little respect for it. Freaks are fallen, unrespectable women with whom males do not enter into long-term relationships." (p. 22). Similar to relationships premised on economic exchanges, bartering merely for pleasure still prohibits the development of sustainable relationships. Watts (2002) observes a conflation of the exchanges of sex and money when he asserts that at times "female sexual pleasure is centered and conceived in terms of profit" (p. 200) especially within the discourses of rappers like Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown. Unfortunately,

even in these pursuits of pleasure relationships, profit is a higher priority than one's partner.

Relationships of exchange do not always have to be solely premised on sex and money, however. Pough (2004) describes exchanges where women are willing to "put-up-with-everything" in exchange for a fairy tale (p. 181) which consists of "'real' love and happiness, being saved from a life of strife, a man at home being a father and a lover, and living happily ever after" (p. 177). The "everything" a woman must put up with includes but is not limited to violence, illicit activities, and infidelity, all the while consistently proving her devotion despite a male partner's aversion to romance and marriage.

Because hip hop is the mirror through which so many youth see themselves, it is important that we pay careful attention to hip hop's portrayal of relationships. We wondered if the problematic gendered relationships of resentment and exchange frequently found in a great deal of hip hop actually made it difficult for today's young people of color to create spaces of love and caring. We were inspired by Pough's (2004) claims that although love in the traditional romantic sense may not be the first thing to come to mind when one thinks of hip hop, many hip hop artists show a dedication to exploring the struggles of building and maintaining intimate relationships. This study shifts the focus from artists' articulations to audience interpretations by asking a diverse set of youth for their opinions about hip hop and love.

Love is an important and necessary phenomenon to study because it poses as a much needed corrective to hip hop's complicated and accusatory gender, sex, and relationship messages. Acknowledging love's presence within hip hop texts and among hip hop audiences celebrates its existence and challenges the stereotype that hip hop is a loveless space. This preliminary research project is significant because it begins to fill a gap in the hip hop literature by exploring how youth of color who are regularly exposed to hip hop perceive love.

Method

Participants

In order to determine how young people think about love within the context of hip hop culture, we administered 95 surveys to a random convenience sample of Southern California youth. The target age range was 14 to 25. Surveys completed by participants who were not within this age range or who failed to complete the age and gender demographic information were eliminated. Our final survey count eligible for analysis was 71 (45 female, 26 male; 40 African American, 13 Latino/a, 5 Bi/multiracial, 2 Asian American/Pacific Islander, and 11 individuals who declined to state an ethnicity). Seventy-two percent of the participants were surveyed in a classroom setting; 34% were surveyed at a church during a regular Wednesday night youth group meeting. The

average age of our participants was 18. Sixty-two percent of the sample was 18 or younger.¹

In addition to 71 being a substantial sample size for a qualitative study based on responses to open-ended survey questions, the composition of this sample size is significant in terms of gender and ethnicity. Women are overrepresented in most survey research. This study is no exception, but when compared to recent studies on African Americans adolescents and hip hop videos, our male population is 7% higher than the norm (Bryant, 2008; Ward, Hansbrough, & Walker, 2005). Additionally, our inclusive approach diversifies most youth music video reception studies which consist of homogenous audiences of predominately white undergraduate students.

Text

Soulja Boy Tell 'Em's popular 2009 three minute music video, "Kiss Me Thru the Phone," featuring Sammie, was selected as a prompt to encourage youth to think about love and loving relationships against a hip hop background. In the video, Soulja Boy and Sammie rap and sing about only being able to connect with their girlfriends via the phone because of their physical distance. In addition to centering on Soulja Boy's primary relationship, the video depicts couples of different ethnicities and ages in separate locations "kissing thru the phone." In the end, Soulja Boy surprises his girlfriend by coming home, and they are reunited.

This particular video was chosen for several reasons. First of all, it was very popular. "Kiss Me" dominated *Billboard's* Rhythmic Chart's number one spot for eight weeks, held *Billboard's* number one ringtone spot for ten consecutive weeks and peaked at number one on BET's "106 & Park" video rotation (Billboard 3.28.2009; Billboard 4.4.2009). When the video aired on MTV and garnered a 1300-spin increase on the radio, it marked Soulja Boy's entrance into the mainstream. We believed that this text would resonate with a youthful audience.

Second, the video concept and lyrics are incredibly simple. Participants who were unfamiliar with the video would have had no trouble interpreting it. Because its content eschews violence, criminal intent, and misogyny, we were assured that few participants would be uncomfortable viewing it. If the video had been more sophisticated or more salacious, subjects would have had to interpret the video before being able to offer their responses. We simply wanted them to think differently about a familiar, uncomplicated video.

Third, in terms of its gendered representations, "Kiss Me" is and is not a typical rap music video. Arnett (2002) observes the following about music videos:

If there is such a thing as a typical music video, it features one or more men performing while beautiful, scantily clad young women dance and writhe lasciviously. Often the men dance, too, but the women always have fewer clothes on.

The women are mostly just props, not characters, not even people, really. (p. 256)

In "Kiss Me" the men are the sole performers—the only characters with voices. Although separated by distance, the girlfriends are certainly the (silent) objects of their affection. Despite the fact that the girlfriends are not scantily clad in super sexually suggestive clothing, they most often wear cleavage-revealing tops in contrast to the more fully clothed men who wear (winter) jackets. The gendered difference in attire may also be partially explained by the men's frequent positioning outside whereas the women they miss are indoors. This subtle distinction justifies a man's penchant to roam and a woman's place in the home. By these standards, "Kiss Me," conveys conventional gendered norms for a rap music video. On the other hand, the characters' interactions are not sexually suggestive. Although Pough (2004) notes that most male rappers eschew romance, these male performers are publicly declaring their affection and expressing a desire to kiss and be kissed without explicit mention of sex.

Despite the redemptive qualities of this video's content, Soulja Boy has been critiqued for degrading women. According to Soulja Boy's critics, the phrase "superman dat ho" from his first popular single "Crank Dat" alluded to ejaculating on a woman's back and adhering a towel to the semen -- like superman. Several students at the University of Minnesota Duluth protested his campus performance because his music "portrays women as solely sex objects and men as solely perpetrators of sexual assault" (Strawn, 2004). In a YouTube video, Soulja Boy promised to offer a more positive representation for his young fans. At the end of his speech, clips from "Kiss Me" play suggesting that the video is a rehabilitation of his reputation. This rap music video combined with Soulja Boy's body of work adheres to conventional and stereotypical gendered representations while also portraying an alternative to rap music video norms by depicting wholesome reciprocal relationships. Soulja Boy's reputation was not a hindrance to the study because we perceived it as a substitute for the standard fare of sex and scandal within music videos. We wondered whether his infamy would affect participants' ability to think about love.

Procedure

After an introduction to the researchers and the purpose of the study, consent and assent forms were administered in accordance with the university's Institutional Review Board protocol. The youth were given the opportunity to ask questions, and they were reminded that their participation was strictly voluntary. After the video was screened at each site (classrooms or at the church), participants were given approximately 30 minutes to complete ten open-ended survey questions about their relationship to hip hop, interpretations of the video, and lived experiences with love (see Appendix A).²

They were instructed to work individually although we noted whisperings among the high school subjects. Participants were not compensated for participation.

Data Analysis

Data was mined via open coding using procedures associated with grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Neuendorf, 2002.). Charmaz (2006) defines coding as, "naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data" (p. 43). To increase intercoder reliability, we practiced labeling emergent themes in a pilot study that consisted of the nonviable surveys. The actual data for the study was initially coded independently. We conferred on the final categories and returned to the data to resolve minute discrepancies. Intercoder reliability for what Corbin and Strauss (2008) call our "interpretive conceptual labels on the data" hovered around 90% for each question (p. 160). In addition to identifying patterns and noting the frequency of themes, we also looked for intense elements that might not have recurred but were significant enough to warrant attention. For each question we noted the percentages of correlating responses. For questions that elicited multiple responses, percentages would have been uninformative; thus, we simply acknowledge recurring themes.

The aim of our inductive analysis is description. Because the study is the first of its kind, we are taking the opportunity to discover emergent themes with the intention of offering a fuller description of what young people think about love. Future studies should include ethnographies and focus groups that expand the ideas germinated in the open-ended surveys.

We generally discovered that despite gender and ethnic differences, on the whole, these youth of color hip hop heads easily defined love, had little trouble determining whether they were in love, and actively sought love's representations in spaces that include hip hop culture. Despite its frequent depiction as a loveless space, this case study of youth reaction to love and "Kiss Me Thru the Phone," proves that a rap music video by a male hip hop artist with a questionable reputation with the opposite sex is not antagonistic to the depiction of love and loving relationships.

Analysis

Hip Hop Preferences

Because this is a study on hip hop and love, it was important to establish the participants' relationship to hip hop. In response to the first question, do you like hip hop, 17% declared that they did not like hip hop mostly citing preferences for other types of music.³ The majority or 83% responded favorably. Rationales ranged from the fact that hip hop "is all around us," "supports my race," "gives a bit of spice to a rather boring society," and "relates to

real life." One 23-year-old African American female eloquently summed an affinity for hip hop. She wrote,

Yes, I enjoy hip hop because it has a story. It voices what the younger generation and some older generation want to say when we cannot be heard. I wouldn't say all hip hop is positive but it is the truth for the most part.

This quote appreciated hip hop's ability to provide a voice for two distinct hip hop generations. Because the participant average age was 18, a majority of these respondents do not fall within Kitwana's (2002) parameters for the hip hop generation—those born between 1965 and 1984. Instead, this population consists of the children of the hip hop generation who were predisposed to appreciate and embrace hip hop as a creative expression because it had already dominated mainstream American culture by the time they were born.

Many respondents justified their affiliation with hip hop culture by explaining that it was "their generation." A 22-year-old African American female born just beyond the hip hop generation bracket emphatically wrote that "hip hop is our generation" even though technically it is not. The second hip hop generation's description of hip hop as their defining identity characteristic is telling considering that more and more members of Kitwana's first hip hop generation are declaring that hip hop is dead. Kitwana (2002) conceded that there were at least three subgroups within the hip hop generation (p. xiv). Now we must account for the subgroups within the second hip hop generation whose affinity for Soulja Boy may very well supersede their appreciation for Tupac or DJ Quick.

The "truths" of the younger and older generations noted in the first quote are the ramifications of a rapidly changing global economy that has contributed to the disfranchisement of urbanites of color. The postindustrial conditions that contributed to the creation of hip hop, especially in Los Angeles, are the same conditions that structure the lived experiences of the newest hip hop generation. Instead of experiencing the loss of industrial jobs, these youth were born into a society where industrial jobs had already disappeared, neighborhoods were solidly gentrified, expressway projects had been completed, public schools were re-segregated, and diminished social services were a way of life (Cross, 1993; Davis, 2006; Kelley, 1994; Quinn, 2005; Rose 2008). Hip hop cannot be dead if the conditions that led to its creation persist, if 83% of our participants admitted to liking it, and if many of them describe it as the defining characteristic of their generation.

The "Kiss Me" video was an appropriate choice of text for the newest hip hop generation because 86% of the participants responded favorably to it. Only 14% did not describe anything that they liked about the video. Thirty-four percent of the participants who enjoyed the video appreciated its aesthetics, which included its production, the performers, or their style. The majority appreciated the video's message of love across diverse relationships.

Respondents reacted strongly to the video's depiction of diversity and its depiction of positive relationships. An 18-year-old African American female stated, "I liked the fact that it had young and old people in it. Unlike the rest of the hip hop videos, it was clean and it had a message in it." A 22-year-old African American female described the video thusly, "...it wasn't too sexual and it was age appropriate and it showed all types of love: age, gender, race, etc." A 21-year-old Latino noted, "I liked that anyone of any age, race, color can be in love." A 25-year-old female who did not ethnically identify explained why she liked the video, "I like the way there weren't only young people calling or texting each other. It showed older people which can give a sense of long lasting love." Interestingly, eight of the respondents directly linked the video to love even though we had not yet asked them to connect the video's message to love.

When asked what they disliked about the video, a small minority of only 7% described a general disdain because they did not like hip hop, the concept, or the artist. However, there was one especially insightful constructive critique from a 23-year-old Latina who was disappointed "that people in prison or military were not shown. That is their only method to show love to their loved one, a kiss through the phone." Despite the seemingly apolitical nature of the video, the youth appreciated representations of the traditionally underrepresented and in this case, keenly identified the absence of prison and military populations both of which are disproportionately comprised of people of color.

"Kiss Me" Content

After establishing the participants' relationship to the video, the survey queried their interpretation of actions taken within the video. Because kissing is so central to the video, we asked the youth to define a kiss. All of the respondents, with the exception of six who either did not answer or were not sure what a kiss meant, answered the question thoroughly and thoughtfully. The younger ($M=16$) and oftentimes male participants defined kisses literally and simply as this 16-year-old Latino stated, "when two lips meet or bond." Others offered multifaceted definitions with the emergent themes of passion, emotion verbs, and love. A minority of ten responses used terms like "heat," "lust," and "attraction" to define a kiss as passion. Forty responses included emotion verbs like missing, caring, sharing intimacy, and showing affection. For example, a 19-year-old Latina defined a kiss in terms of missing. She wrote, "A kiss is like a 'I miss you' or 'missed you and am glad to see you'." Caring was articulated by a 19-year-old female, "To me it just shows the person that you care about them." Another 19-year-old (an African American male), linked kisses and intimacy, "A kiss symbolizes the intimacy of the two and how they feel about each other." Finally, a 23-year-old African American female concluded that kisses represent affection, "A kiss is a sign of affection. To me, it also means trust because you

shouldn't just kiss anyone. It means love, care, passion, and understanding." Twenty-four of the most heartfelt responses directly linked kisses and love. A 16-year-old biracial male succinctly answered, "In my opinion, a kiss can be used to say I love you." Whether the definitions were physical, passionate, emotive, or loving, the youth consistently interpreted kisses as a positive form of communication between two people.

With their individual definitions of a kiss in mind, youth were then asked if they would kiss a significant other through the phone if others were watching. The results for this question were conclusive. Whether or not the participants wanted to kiss a significant other through the phone appeared to be based on personal preference. There were no age or gender distinctions in the responses. Eleven males said they would; eleven males said they would not.

Forty-two percent of respondents said they would not kiss their significant other through the phone if others were watching with a majority of them citing that kissing through the phone was senseless. For example, a 16-year-old biracial male wrote, "No, what is the point? It is a phone, not a person." A 15-year-old African American female wrote, "Well I wouldn't because it's pointless and embarrassing." Another 15-year-old African American male represented senselessness from a practical point of view, "No because it could mess your screen up." For roughly half of those surveyed, kisses appear to be best exchanged in person.

Forty-four percent of the participants, on the other hand, said they would kiss a significant other through the phone with the majority stating that they wouldn't care if others were watching because it was their business. An 18-year-old female who chose not to ethnically self-identify wrote, "Yeah, I would cuzz I don't care what other people say. That's me kissing my boo thru the phone, not them." An 18-year-old biracial male said, "I don't 'cause it's my business." These "my business" responses reflect the opinions of independent individuals undeterred by oppositional peer pressure. Additionally, 7% percent offered no answer at all and 7% reported that their kissing through the phone when others are watching would depend on circumstances.

Because many participants linked kisses to love and nearly half said they would kiss a significant other through the phone, it comes as no surprise that the majority of the subjects reported that the people in the video show love. Fifty-eight percent stated that love was shown either: a) in general, b) through expressions/interactions, or c) through the literal depiction of kissing through the phone. This 18-year-old ethnically unidentified female described the general communication of love: "Yeah they was showin' a lot of love to they boo." Expressions and interactions were discussed by a 19-year-old African American male, "Yes by the kisses, smiles, talking and laughing." An 18-year-old African American female wrote, "Yes, by kissing each other thru the phone with no hesitation." A 37% minority offered non-specific reasons for why the video did not show love.

The only rationale that recurred was the claim that the actors were acting as their "job" or "for money."⁴

Another important finding was the small number of four youth who seemed to believe that the older couples were better representations of love than the younger ones. A 21-year-old African American female's perspective is indicative of this subcategory: "They don't show love. Well, the teens don't they just show that they like each other, but the older couples seem to love one another." Because the younger and older couples described in the video behave in similar ways—no one does much else other than kiss through the phone—this respondent distinguishes between liking and loving based on something other than the characters' actions.

Sternberg (1987) describes quantitative reinforcement theories of liking as often premised on attraction. Individuals like other individuals because they are attracted to them based upon some form of reward, which Brehm (1985) categorizes as

intrinsic characteristics of the person, such as beauty, sense of humor, and intelligence; behaviors of the person toward one, such as giving sexual attention or consolation in times of stress; and access to desired external resources granted by the other person, such as prestige, money, and other people. (qtd in Sternberg 1987, p. 333)

These rewards may have implicitly registered for the respondent and made the teens' interactions seem less loving. The youth are physically attractive; they are depicted as constantly talking and paying attention to each other whereas the older couples are depicted only as kissing thru the phone. The youth are also associated with material things. Several respondents noted that they appreciated the rapper's clothes and jewelry. Others critiqued the unnecessary materialism in the video. One 23-year-old African American female wrote,

I didn't like how they made the young black woman [featured model] look materialistic, skinny, face made up, extensions, etc. I'm not saying that it's not ok, but it looked racist and fake. Everyone else has on less noticeable make-up, jewelry, etc. The older couple wasn't skinny or nothing, like it was immature and when you grow up love is more internal and not external.

These "rewards," namely attractiveness, attention, and material possessions, may have interfered with some of the participants' abilities to view the teens' relationships as loving. Note that the latter respondent also privileges the older couple's demonstration of love.

Sternberg (1987) further argues that the reinforcement approaches to liking and loving "are less in fashion" because they focus on liking as more of an exchange and ignore the "intimacy in communication" more frequently linked to loving (pp. 334-335). These

female participants astutely noted that the exchange of rewards was interfering with teens' ability to show love in the video. Both quotes demonstrate resistance to the hip hop love ethic of exchange. Not only do they resist an exchange-based approach to love but their veneration for the older couples' expressions of love hint at the fact that some youth seek examples of mature relationships that show love as something other than attraction. This may explain why 52% of the youth who liked the video expressly appreciated its diversity.

Lived Experience

The final survey questions queried how the youth recognized love in their lived experiences. We asked if they were in love as the last question because we wanted them to process their observations and definitions and apply them to their answer. Consequently, we mention the question at the beginning of the lived experience section in order to contextualize their responses. Four percent did not answer whether they were in love. The rest of the participants answered the question seriously. Twenty percent admitted to being unsure. A 20-year-old Latina lamented, "It's hard and scary to be in love with someone that's always in the street and with their friends." A 23-year-old African American female admitted confusion, "I don't know what I am. There is this someone that I would do anything for. I've been with this person on and off for the past six years. Based on what we've been through, I've been holding back. I would say with counseling and maturity they could be the one." Of those unsure, nine were female and four were male. Males did not express profound confusion about being in love the way that the African American and Latina females did. This could affirm hooks' (2000) assertion that men are more confident about love because they are accustomed to receiving love whereas women are accustomed to pursuing it.

Forty-four percent of the respondents said they were in love. Several respondents used exclamation marks or hearts after their response. One sweet response from a 17-year-old African American female explained, "Yes, I am in love with this special person who cares about me and wants me to achieve my goals who's very caring and loving." Thirty-one percent of the participants reported that they were not in love. One indicative response from a 22-year-old female read, "No, honestly, I don't believe in love, and I don't use the word [with] anyone [except] family and God. To people, they just think it's a word. To me, it's feelings."

There was also a significant subcategory within the yes responses that articulated non-romantic relationships which included family, best friends, and God/Christ. We admit to not distinguishing between "do you love?" and "are you in love?" for the purposes of the study. We wanted to give participants the opportunity to answer the question as they saw fit. These nonromantic responses should not be seen as anomalies but as part of the youths'

broadened spectrum for definitions of love and what it means to give and be in love.

We specifically asked where African Americans show love because: a) the face of hip hop is still largely African American b) the primary characters in the video were African American c) we intended to oversample this population because of their underrepresentation in the literature and their overrepresentation as media consumers (Ward et al., 2005) and d) because we wanted to gauge the accuracy of bell hooks' (2001) perception that derogatory images of black people "teach black folks and everyone else, especially young children who lack critical skills, that black people are hateful and unworthy of love" (p. 65).

For this sample population, hooks' assertion is inaccurate. According to the participants, black people show love everywhere and anywhere—more specifically in their communities, in the media, and in public. Some of the public places appeared random, but included parties, weddings, the street, museums, (theme) parks, restaurants, church, society, the liquor store, the club, the mall/store, the workplace, the beach, and the bus. This 20-year-old biracial female referenced all of the major emergent themes, "In my community, on the streets, in the stores, at the mall, at the movies, especially when they are at the clubs." Initially, it seemed odd that youth would name the club—a notorious hook up site (Hutchinson, 1999; Muñoz-Laboy, Weinstein, & Parker, 2007)—as a place where African American people show love, but individuals often arrive at the club already partnered and it is not impossible to start a love relationship after a fortuitous club encounter. It might also be possible that the public places named are all places where African American people go to meet suitable relationship partners. Perhaps as Collins (2004) notes because "growing numbers of heterosexual African American women face bleak prospects for finding committed, loving relationships" African American women have become more open to the types of places listed above to find love (p. 263).

Also promising was a black male and a Latina's specific mention of the Obamas. One claimed that "the Obamas show love constantly." While this data is statistically insignificant, this reference substantiates claims that the image of the Obamas is encouraging the black community and American society in general to see African Americans and their (potential) relationships in a positive light.

In contrast to these public places and public couples, a 16-year-old African American male described a private space: "I see my mom and dad show love all the time." This male's matter of fact description of his parents' interactions not only depicts how love should be shown, but how love is shown within many families despite discourses of fractured families and a generation of father-lacking young men who have no one to show them how to love.

Not only did the youth see love everywhere, but the majority of them clearly articulated how they knew when

someone loved them. The smallest category consisted of 10% of the population who relied on their intuition. Their average age was nineteen and more men (five) than women (two) reported, as this 14-year-old Latino summed, "You can't explain it, but you just feel it." Only a minority of 14% admitted to being unsure which is unusual considering most love theorists agree that "love, like all emotions, is not directly observable" (Jackson, 1995, p. 52).

Recognizing love, however, seemed simpler for 76% of the subjects who overwhelmingly defined love in terms of actions that represented a bond between two people. The significant subcategories of actions that represent bondedness were physical expression, verbal expression, and unconditional acceptance which uncannily rearticulate Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of love—passion (physical expression), intimacy (verbal expression), and decision/commitment (unconditional acceptance). Sternberg argues that these three components are present to some degree in loving relationships. Each youth observation does not include all three but addressing them separately confirms their presence among the population as a whole.

Although none of the respondents evaluated love in terms of sexual consummation, a minority within the bondedness category noted that love was expressed physically. When Sternberg (1986) describes passion as "the drives that lead to romance, physical attraction, sexual consummation, and related phenomena in loving relationships" he does not exclusively refer to sex (p. 119). Neither does this 23-year-old African American female, but her mention of the following physical acts communicate passion: "...he moves the hair from off your face and puts it behind your ear and kisses you." Despite a sex-saturated media industry, these youth recognized love as something other than sex.

An additional action subcategory was verbal expression. Many wrote "because they tell me" or they "say I love you." "In the context of the triangular theory," Sternberg (1986) asserts, "the intimacy component refers to those feelings in a relationship that promote closeness, bondedness, and connectedness" (p. 120). "Intimate communication with the loved one" is one of the feelings Sternberg (1986) lists that communicates love.⁵ Although youth seem to value verbal expression, they intuitively know that it should not be the only expression of love. One 19-year-old Asian American male noted that "I love you" must be said seriously. A 19-year-old Latino concurs that verbal expressions of love should come from the heart. Despite the fact that verbal expression was our most significant subcategory, our participants noted wariness about individuals who only say "I love you." This quote from an 18-year-old African American female reiterates the importance of words and actions: "They express their feelings to you over and over not just with words but actions also."

Unconditional acceptance was another burgeoning subcategory because even at a young age, the respondents noted how important it was for someone to "have my

back 100%." An 18-year-old African American female described her version of unconditional love: "When someone shows me they love me. When someone accepts me for who I am knowing all of the bad and good things about me. Someone who takes the time to get to know me and deal with me." Other explanations of committed love included being "with someone for a long time" "in ups and downs" "when you need them." At their young age, these participants expect commitment.

Sternberg (1986) iterates the importance of short term decisions "that one loves another" and long term commitments "to maintain that love over time" (p. 122):

It is important not to neglect the decision/commitment component of love just because it does not have the "heat" or "charge" of the intimacy and passion components of love. Loving relationships almost inevitably have their ups and downs, and there may be times in such relationships when the decision/commitment component is all or almost all that keeps the relationship going. This component can be essential for getting through hard times and for returning to better ones. In ignoring it or separating it from love, one may be missing exactly that component of loving relationships that enables one to get through the hard times as well as the easy ones. (p. 123)

We were heartened to note the youth's identifiable definitions of love that expressed mutuality, reciprocity, and commitment through various actions that did not lead to sex. Individuals who define love in terms of specific affirming actions are less likely to find themselves in abusive relationships. Especially in an era when popular R&B singer Chris Brown can violently abuse his superstar pop princess girlfriend, Rihanna, these youth intuitively know that the proper physical and verbal expressions of love and unconditional acceptance preclude such behavior.

Notwithstanding the youth's ability to recognize love, when directly asked to define love, they gave as many definitions as there were participants. The answers were so diverse that they were unable to be categorized. Other than the 14% who offered no definition, the common threads were love as a type of connection or bondedness, as mentioned previously. What follows is a sampling of 12 of the most articulate expressions that reflect the tenor of the responses as a whole.

"Love to me is when one person knows that the person is there for them and nothing else and they can tell them if they were wrong or right."—14-year-old African American male

"Love is something special, something that comes from your heart and soul."—16-year-old female

"A heartfelt affection, mutual care, unconditional joy, kindness, and sincerity."—23-year-old Latina

"Love is when you like someone so much that you cannot express it."—18-year-old Latina female

"Love is a rose that blooms as pretty as it looks. You take care of it like you take care of your love."—17-year-old Latino

"Love is something that should not be played with. It is a bond that two people share that separates them from the rest of the world."—18-year-old African American female

"Your soul recognizes its counterpart."—18-year-old black male

"Something that is unchanging. Something that can never be defined by words, but it is an ultimate, deep soulful connection between two people."—23-year-old African American female

"Respect, compassion, trust, patience"—18-year-old male

"It would be too much for just words. I would do anything for the girl I love. If she needed me in the middle of the night, I would be there for her, no matter where I was or what I was doing. Love is unconditional. Unconditional care for another person."—20-year-old African American male

"I would be in denial about if love exists nowadays, but if it does when one is willing to give up its last for the other. It's compromise, trust, understanding, affection, sacrifice, loyalty, and determination—everything one is willing to give and put up with for their 'special' someone."—23-year-old African American female

"That's a question that is hard to answer. The only thing I've known about true love is that God is love. He's a true definition of love."—23-year-old African American female

In *The Art of Loving*, Erich Fromm (1956) describes our culture as consisting of people eager to make themselves loveable but afraid of loving. He writes, "Most people see the problem of love primarily as that of *being loved*, rather than that of *loving*..." (p. 2). Only the first statement by the 14-year-old African American male is a statement about receiving love. The others, irrespective of age, gender, and ethnicity, are consistently about giving or mutuality.

Conclusions

Despite common quips that kids are too young to experience love, this population seems more sure than those described by love theorists. Robert Peck (2003) defined love as "the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth" (p. 81). His book, *The Road Less Traveled*, is dedicated to helping adults find the discipline to embrace genuine love as a volitional "commitment to be loving whether or not the loving feeling is present" (p. 119). These youth seem to already understand that. Love to them is neither conditional nor about what they gain; the emphasis is on what they can share with another person. Note the language used to define love: "affection, mutual care, determination, trust, unconditional, joy, kindness, sincerity, sacrifice, loyalty, understanding, respect, compassion, and patience." They sophisticatedly mirrored hooks' (2000) ingredients for love: "care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication" (p. 5). These youth seemed to agree with Sternberg & Grajek (1984) that "love can be among the most intense of human emotions, and is certainly one of the most sought after" (p. 312). They seemed to disagree, however, with the claim that "no one knows quite what it is" (Sternberg & Grajek, 1984, p. 312). Perhaps the theorists have erred in asking the wrong population. These positive definitions of love and loving also beg the question, what happens when youth mature?

Peck would assert that passionate love, as defined by Hatfield (1988) as "a state of intense longing for union with another," fades (p. 191). Peck (2003) argues:

We fall in love only when we are consciously or unconsciously sexually motivated. The second problem is that the experience of falling in love is invariably temporary. No matter whom we fall in love with, we sooner or later fall out of love if the relationship continues long enough. (p. 84)

Peck believes the problem lies in the fairy tale myths that there is one person for everyone and once we find and fall in love with that person, we get married and live happily ever after. When the myth reveals itself as a myth, potentially loving people become jaded and focus on being loved.

Passionate love or falling in love does fade and relationships will end when they are not paired with companionate love, "the quiet love that is left once the flames of passion die down (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1996, p.135) or "the affection we feel for those with whom our lives are deeply entwined" (Hatfield, 1988, p. 191). Perhaps these youth still believe in love because they already have both types. Furthermore, 42% admitted to being in love. Their definitions also make room for the commitment, the "standing in love," of companionate love as well.

Even if these youth's definitions of love seem more promising than the standard fare within hip hop or more mature perspectives in general, love and loving never occur in a vacuum. Both concepts are contingent upon culture and are socially constructed via our interactions and (mediated) narratives. Schafer (2008) echoes the opinion of many social scientists when she argues that the experience of falling in love is a uniquely Western, individualistic phenomenon "correlated with the rise of nuclear families, the erosion of personal networks, and the rise of individualism" (p. 188). Collins (2004) argues that love "is profoundly affected by the political, economic, and social conditions of the new racism" (p. 249). The bondedness fondly described by the youth is actually the most vulnerable love characteristic for people of color who disproportionately are under- or unemployed and confront heterosexual tensions between men who feel their women are a threat to their earning potential by either being direct competitors or the needy mothers of their children (Cazenave, 1983; Ralph, 2006).

Because love is so culturally specific, many people of color find themselves torn between collectivist notions of love and individualistic notions of love. They often unfairly compare themselves to Eurocentric standards

(Bell, Bouie, & Baldwin, 1990). These youth appear to be exempt from these documented challenges to love. Our best explanation is that they have not yet reached significant earning potentials that would make economics a threat to their ability to love. Even the individuals at the older end of age range were still in school and anticipating increased earning potentials. Perchance, when there is little money at stake, love is more likely to thrive.

We were encouraged by the numbers of male and female youth of color who showed us that they knew when someone was showing love and also knew how to show love to others. We were more inspired by the honesty with which the young people answered what is often perceived as a difficult question at best and a trivial one at worst. In this instance, hip hop is not a barrier to love. Soulja Boy Tell 'Em's video "Kiss Me Thru the Phone" actually spurred more conversations about love than it hindered. Hip hop has the potential to engage youth about love and its manifestations. Despite hip hop's frequent manifestation of a love ethic of exchange, we encourage its use as a popular genre for helping young people discover what love means to them.

Appendix A: Short Answer Survey

Show Some Love: Kiss Me Thru the Phone

Please Circle One: Male Female

Please Circle One:

African American Latino Bi/multiracial Asian American/Pacific Islander White

Age _____

1. Do you like hip hop, why or why not?
2. What did you like about the video?
3. What did you dislike about the video?
4. What does a kiss mean?
5. Would you want to kiss your significant other thru the phone if other people were watching you? Why or Why not?
6. Do you think the people in the video show love? If so, how?
7. Where else do you see black people who show love?
8. How do you know when someone loves you?
9. What is your definition of love?
10. Are you in love?

Notes

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- 1 Although we were most interested in the younger population, we expanded our target age to 25 in order to balance our desire for a representative sample size with the difficulty in securing parental consent. In our experience, parents were either unavailable or uninterested. In other cases, the teenagers' forms were frequently "lost" either in route to the parents or in route from the parents to the survey site.
- 2 Because we did not interact with the youth (besides a basic introduction) until after they had completed the survey, we have no

- reason to believe that our presence as young African American women significantly affected their responses.
- 3 Even though 17% of the respondents declared that they did not like hip hop, we included their surveys in the remainder of the study because the youth who preferred other genres of music still responded favorably to "Kiss Me Thru the Phone" and clearly articulated expressions of love within the video.
- 4 The unaccounted for 5% answered "somewhat" with no explanation or failed to respond.
- 5 Sternberg's (1986) other intimacy criteria: "(a) desire to promote the welfare of the loved one, (b) experienced happiness with the loved one, (c) high regard for the loved one, (d) being able to count on the loved one in times of need, (e) mutual understanding with the loved one, (f) sharing of one's self and one's possessions with the loved one, (g) receipt of emotional support from the loved one,

(h) giving of emotional support to the loved one, (i) intimate communication with the loved one, and (j) valuing the loved one in one's life." (p. 120-121)

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